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Edgar Allan Poe and the Great Dismal Swamp: Reading Race and Environment after the Aesthetic Turn

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The job now before us is no longer to go to different places in the same country—less crowded sites, less trodden paths—but to generate an altogether different landscape so we can travel through it.¹

Stéphane Mallarmé long ago singled out “Dream-Land” as one of Edgar Allan Poe’s most characteristic poems, and its refrain “Out of SPACE—out of TIME” remains one of Poe’s most frequently quoted lines.² Yet the poem itself has been virtually unstudied throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Formalist critics have dismissively described “Dream-Land” as a transcendent “no place of no reference” that succeeds in “block[ing] the process of signification altogether” or as “just what the title promises: a description of the topsy-turvy world of dreams.”³ And, while historicist studies of Poe’s work ubiquitously trot out the poem’s refrain in order to denounce the “genius” that falsely claims to transcend everyday life, they seem to regard the poem itself as an essentially uninteresting example of the evasive work of the aesthetic.⁴

1. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 165.

2. See Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Poems*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 342. As Kevin J. Hayes (preface to *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes [Cambridge University Press, 2013], xv) remarks, “many commentators have used this memorable pair of prepositional phrases” to signal the distance between Poe’s imaginative writings and their larger cultural context.

3. Shira Wolosky, *The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 192–93; and Floyd Stoval, “The Conscious Art of Edgar Allan Poe,” *College English* 24 (1963): 417–21.

4. Joan Dayan’s invocation and summary dismissal of “Dream-Land” exemplifies this widespread tendency: “much that is necessary to the sanctification of something called ‘literariness’ . . . is risked if we put Poe in his place, if we avoid the romantic image of a genius in ‘Dreamland,’ ‘Out of SPACE/out of TIME’” (“Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, Slaves,” in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stephen Rachman and Shawn Rosenheim [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995], 196).

If “Dream-Land” has seemed an unremarkable paean to the genius that we must resist in order to historicize, it is only because an anachronistic dichotomy between aesthetic autonomy and historical engagement has too often constrained scholarship of early American literature.⁵ Although “a historicized, politically sensitive, even progressive idea of aesthetics” developed in studies of British literature in the 1990s, a similar aesthetic turn has been slower in coming to Americanist literary criticism.⁶ And very little of this new work has addressed Poe.⁷ This is curious, given the fact that Poe has in many ways defined the category of the aesthetic in nineteenth-century US literary studies.⁸ In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, the producer of aesthetic works began to be characterized as a genius, a figure that Poe has often been taken to exemplify: from an early review of his work, which stated that the young writer was “evidently a fine genius,” to the 2012 James McTeigue film, *The Raven*, where one character proclaims, “God gave him a spark of genius and quenched it in misery.”⁹ Yet the most influential scholarship of the past two decades has

5. As Paul Gilmore notes, critics over the last several decades have tended to equate “New Critical formalism with aesthetics in toto” (*Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism* [Stanford University Press, 2009], 1). For detailed analyses of the sometimes-problematic indebtedness of the field of early American literature to the discipline of history, see the special joint issue of *Early American Literature* and *American Literary History* 22 (2010).

6. Edward Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 7. In 2004 *American Literature* published a special issue devoted, rather ominously, to “Aesthetics and the End(s) of American Cultural Studies,” edited by Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo. More recent work in this area includes Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Gilmore, *Aesthetic Materialism*; Eric Slaughter, *The State as a Work of Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2009); Ivy G. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (Oxford University Press, 2011); and Christopher Looby and Cindy Weinstein, eds., *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Much of this work has been influenced by the work of philosopher Jaques Rancière, esp. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

7. Exceptions include Weinstein’s essay on temporality in *Pym* in Looby and Weinstein, *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, 197–218; Rachel Polonsky, “Poe’s Aesthetic Theory,” in *Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42–55; C. T. Walters, “Poe’s ‘Philosophy of Furniture’ and the Aesthetics of Fictional Design,” and Daniel J. Philippon, “Poe in the Ragged Mountains: Environmental History and Romantic Aesthetics,” both in *Edgar Allan Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, ed. James M. Hutchisson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 1–16 and 89–102.

8. Despite the relative anachronism of the term, which was not commonly used by English speakers during Poe’s lifetime, Polonsky notes that “the word ‘aesthetic’ and its cognates have clung to the name of Edgar Allan Poe” (“Poe’s Aesthetic Theory,” 42).

9. *Ladies’ Magazine and Literary Gazette* (1830). For a discussion of how Poe’s pedantry was sometimes taken as evidence by his contemporaries that he lacked a spontaneous “genius,” see Scott Peebles, *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), 15. For a historicized account of genius in late nineteenth-century America, see Gustavus

focused on Poe's centrality to broader historical and political contexts, rather than to aesthetics. Following Toni Morrison's 1993 assessment that "no early American author is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe," critics have produced nuanced studies of American literature in general, and of Poe in particular, in relation to race and history.¹⁰ Yet they have often done so by avoiding or demystifying the aesthetic, focusing instead on history as the occluded cause of artistic works.¹¹

In this essay, I examine genius and the aesthetic in relation to Poe without the suspicious tendencies that accompany a depth hermeneutics, in which critics set out to uncover meanings that are hidden beneath a veneer of aesthetic form.¹² Because Poe's work has remained a cornerstone of both formalist and historicist approaches to American literature, and because, like the purloined letter, "Dream-Land" has all along been hiding in plain sight, it offers an ideal starting point for reinvigorating our understanding of aesthetics in American literary history.¹³ In this poem, which is the culmination of a series of revisions that spanned most of his career, Poe develops a conception of aesthetic genius marked not by originality, autonomy, and freedom, but rather by convertibility, enmeshment, and circumscription. "Dream-Land" is suffused with the relentless ap-
position of the material and the spiritual that characterizes the most memorable moments in Poe's oeuvre, as when his monomaniacal narrator identifies the idealized Berenice with her hard, white teeth, or when a black raven croaking "Nevermore" comes to emblemize the purity of lost love. Joan (Colin) Dayan has argued that in such works Poe creates "pulsing border-grounds where things and thoughts, clods of earth and disem-

Stadler, *Troubling Minds: The Cultural Politics of Genius in the United States, 1840–1890* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). For an analysis of the concept of genius in the early national period, see Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination*.

10. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 32. Morrison was pushing back against a longheld consensus that, in the words of T. S. Eliot, "there can be few authors of such eminence who have drawn so little from their own roots, who have been so isolated from their surroundings" ("From Poe to Valéry," *Hudson Review* 2 [1949]: 329). William Carlos Williams early on took exception to this view, arguing in 1925 that Poe was "intimately shaped by his locality and time" (*In the American Grain* [repr., New York: New Directions, 1956], 216).

11. For an overview of the wealth of historical and contextual studies of Poe, see Hutchisson's introduction to *Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, x.

12. The "hermeneutics of suspicion," which seek to uncover the hidden social meaning of cultural work, and which have been pervasive in historicist literary criticism, found their most influential formulations in Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

13. Eliot placed Poe at the vanguard of a "tradition" of thinking about poetry . . . which Eliot regards as 'the most interesting development of poetic consciousness anywhere in that . . . hundred years' (Polonsky, "Poe's Aesthetic Theory," 45).

bodied spirits alternate, poised in their rites of conversion.”¹⁴ But unlike many of these poems and tales, which have been successfully read symbolically, psychologically, and/or through philosophical or historicist lenses, “Dream-Land” stubbornly resists reading practices that prioritize either text or context. Its endless entanglements require instead an interpretive practice that brings text, the natural world, and human action into the same, nonhierarchical plane of analysis.

In pursuing such an interpretive practice, I join a number of scholars, inspired by Bruno Latour’s work in science studies, “to generate an altogether different landscape” of criticism than the one shaped by the familiar approach of detached critique.¹⁵ For example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have expressed dissatisfaction with “demystification” as a methodology and proposed that “surface” reading might serve us better today than a “heroic,” suspicious ideology critique.¹⁶ Yet, as many other scholars have been quick to point out, this privileging of formal matters risks reverting to a discredited aestheticism that undervalues the role of ideology in structuring lifeworlds. It also reinforces the wrongheaded dichotomy between formalist surface and historicist depth.¹⁷ A broader view of nineteenth-century conceptions of genius and the aesthetic, which recognizes Poe’s investment in aesthetic objects marked equally by formal surfaces, historical depths, and relays with natural and built environments, can help move us out of this bind.

As I will show, “Dream-Land” is a product of an understanding of the aesthetic that we might term ecological, which is interwoven with a larger envi-

14. Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe’s Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 14, 83.

15. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 165. Among these scholars are Rita Felski, who has proclaimed “Context Stinks!” in an effort to “shake up a ubiquitous academic ethos of detachment, negativity, and doubt” (“Context Stinks,” *New Literary History* 42 [2011]: 575), and Heather Love, who has argued for careful description over the “richness” of an interpretive depth hermeneutics in “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics after the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 42 (2010): 371–91.

16. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21. Prior to Best and Marcus, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called out the “paranoia” of contemporary literary scholarship in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 123–51. Michael Warner (“Uncritical Reading” in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop [New York: Routledge, 2004], 16) argued that modes of reading often deemed “uncritical” might nevertheless also “suture textual practice with reflection, reason, and a normative discipline of subjectivity.”

17. See esp. Suvir Kaul, “Reading, Constraint and Freedom,” *Eighteenth Century* 54 (2013): 129–32; Ellen Rooney, “Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21 (2010): 112–39; and Jason M. Baskin, “Soft Eyes: Marxism, Surface, and Depth,” *Mediations: A Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 28 (2015): 5–18.

ronment that also includes meter, form, bioregion, history, and embodied experience.¹⁸ Reading the poem's proliferation of frames of reference requires a textured approach to the concept of surface, one that is more closely aligned with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which seeks to renew rather than (as many have mistakenly assumed) repudiate critique.¹⁹ To borrow a phrase from Latour, critics like Best and Marcus have tended to "simplify matters prematurely" by seeing surface as straightforward, as possessing an empirical (and therefore uncontested, if politically tenuous) validity. By contrast, Latour argues that practitioners of a rejuvenated but not repudiated critique will "navigate this flattened space" such that "matters of concern," those entities that solicit our attention, are not too quickly settled into "matters of fact," known quantities of a "reality" that is at once unshakable and somehow external to human experience. Despite his emphasis on "flattening the social," Latour is interested not in surface per se but rather in the strength and variety of connections that a slow, careful critic can establish among any number of entities. It is in and through such three-dimensional attachments that I locate the work of the aesthetic in "Dream-Land."²⁰

Poe's inclination to construct and theorize aesthetic surfaces in which a reader might fully immerse himself has been noticed by a number of critics.²¹ Yet Poe's surfaces are by no means uncomplicated.²² Rather, Poe's

18. Although excluded from the ecocritical canon that emerged in the 1990s, Poe's work is clearly engaged with what Matthew Taylor has termed "the complex nature-culture imbrications currently at issue in much ecocriticism and science studies discourse" ("The Nature of Fear: Edgar Allan Poe and Posthuman Ecology," *American Literature* 84 [2012]: 363).

19. See esp. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–48. My approach also owes a great deal to with Tim Ingold's ecological anthropology, esp. "Making Culture and Weaving the World," in *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, ed. Paul Graves-Brown (New York: Routledge, 2000), and *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

20. See Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 205. As Wilson reminds us, the term "aesthetics" in the Kantian tradition is often linked to formalism and/or to the evaluative stance of the critic, while later thinkers such as Rancière have instead insisted on "the necessity of reclaiming the aesthetic" so that it is no longer "disaggregated from examinations of the historical and political" (*Specters of Democracy*, 8). The swamp aesthetic that I delineate in Poe's work relates equally to the formal, the historical and the political, and replaces the evaluative valence of the term "aesthetics" with an emphasis on the material and natural world.

21. Dayan speaks of Poe's "preference for surfaces over depths" (*Fables of Mind*, 91), and Polonsky notes that Poe's discussions of aesthetics, though they at times draw on romanticism's "conceptual vocabulary, its rhetoric and its metaphors," such as the vocabulary of depth; at other times they "redirect critical attention onto technique, to art as a clever illusion which the artist controls like a mathematical or mechanical problem" ("Poe's Aesthetic Theory," 43).

22. Along similar lines, Paul de Man ("Form and Intent in American New Criticism," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983], 23) noted three decades ago that the "continuity between depth

most aestheticized poem requires a textured surface reading, which flattens but does not simplify its objects of study, and seeks instead to understand how and where these objects are connected within a larger environment.²³ Reading in this way, what we find in the poem is not a representation of transcendent Genius (often associated with Poe himself), or an instance of the aesthetic functioning as deceptive veneer (as historicist readings of Poe often argue).²⁴ We find instead a rather different form of genius, exemplified, however unexpectedly, by maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina. The escape “Dream-Land” evokes is—at one and the same time—the escape of genius into a world of “fugitive poems” (a widely used nineteenth-century term describing poetry that transports readers out of the here and now) and the escape of fugitive slaves into the Great Dismal Swamp.

Although previous critics have missed Poe’s affiliation of genius and maroon, a number of scholars have established that the broader history of aesthetics is intimately bound up with the history of race and slavery.²⁵ Yet the link between race and the aesthetic is often evanescent or phantasmagorical. Citing the ubiquity of tropes of invisibility in black radical aesthetics, Fred Moten has argued that these alternative forms of presence offer ways “to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognized as the unrecognizable,” and Saidiya V. Hartman has explicated the link between “hypervisibility” of enslaved black bodies and the necessary “obscurity” and “opacity” of black cultural production.²⁶ Both Moten and Hart-

and surface” is “the most problematic issue with which the theory of poetry will have to deal.”

23. This is not to suggest that a reading that combines formalist and historicist approaches is itself new or distinctive. Indeed, a majority of critics working today recognize the necessity of brining these methods into some kind of working relationship. Yet typically one remains primary. By contrast, what I hope to achieve with textured surface reading is a leveling of the playing field that also remains attentive to the material or natural world: “form” is not foremost, and neither is “history,” and both are recognized as inextricably enmeshed with a larger environment.

24. Maurice Lee offers an incisive analysis of the interrelation of chattel bondage and philosophical movements in the antebellum period in *Slavery, Philosophy and American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Building on Lee’s insights, I aim to connect Poe to the philosophical discourse of the aesthetic in relation to the political history of race and slavery.

25. As Simon Gikandi has recently pointed out, this connection, despite the frequency with which it has been denied, “is sometimes so obvious that it does not demand any deep hermeneutics” (“Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 60 [2001]: 325).

26. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 68; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 36. See also Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*.

man are discussing African American aesthetic production, while Poe has rightly been linked to a white supremacist ideology.²⁷ Yet his aesthetics is likewise tied to race and grounded in the interconnection and convertability of what is visible on the surface and what remains, to use one of his favored terms, “indefinitive.”²⁸ Connecting surface and depth more dramatically than any of his other poems or tales, “Dream-Land” figures aesthetic genius and swamp maroon simultaneously. It does not do so in order to obscure social realities like race but rather as a way of working through the myriad material entanglements of life, art and environment. The fugitive genius that a textured surface reading brings into view is not an isolated, abstract individual but part of an embedded, embodied collective.

I. PLACE, PERSONHOOD, AND THE GOTHIC

The publication history of “Dream-Land” and related poems indicates the poem’s centrality to Poe’s aesthetic project across a span of two decades. Poe published some iteration of this poem multiple times between 1827 and 1845. The full version of “Dream-Land” first appeared in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1844, and several times Poe republished a shorter version that excised two repetitions of the refrain.²⁹ *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), includes the related “Dreams,” “Visits of the Dead,” and “The Lake,” which describes a landscape akin to the one we find in “Dream-Land.”³⁰ Significant portions of these three poems find their way into Poe’s second volume, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (1829), where they are reworked in “Spirits of the Dead,” “A Dream,” and “Fairyland.” “Fairyland,” which also appeared in his 1831 collection, included lines virtually identical to those used in “Dream-Land.” John Neal singled these out for special praise in the earliest published review of Poe’s poetry:

If E. A. P. of Baltimore—whose lines about “Heaven” . . . are, though nonsense, rather exquisite nonsense—would but do himself justice, he

27. See John Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg, eds., *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

28. As Dayan points out, Poe undoes any simple opposition between “scientific reason” and “poetic intuition” or “material fact” and “visionary knowledge” (*Fables of Mind*, 14, 9). See also Colleen Glenney Boggs, who brilliantly reads Poe in relation to Latour’s “two senses” of representation (of things and of citizens) in *Animalia Americana: Animal Representations and Biopolitical Subjectivity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 110.

29. My citations are drawn from the June 1844 version printed in *Graham’s*.

30. Like “Dream-Land,” “Dreams” suggests that the happiness of the speaker has not been lost but rather displaced, while “Visits of the Dead” tells of a lonely soul encountering the spirits of the departed.

might make a beautiful and perhaps magnificent poem. There is a good deal to justify such a hope.

Dim vales—and shadowy floods,
And cloudy-looking woods,
Whose forms we can't discover,
For the tears that—drip all over.³¹

Neal's hopes for E. A. P.'s poetry likely were not realized when this quatrain, nearly verbatim, found its final home in "Dream-Land." The later poem intensifies the illogic of its predecessor, with which Neal found fault. Yet it is the poem's very nonsensical qualities, its jarring, discordant effects, that make it so crucial for understanding Poe's aesthetics.³²

Being kidnapped, thrown into an unknown environment, forcibly transported from one place to another, with one's self-identity and ties of kinship under constant attack: these are hallmarks of the experience of enslavement. The opening of "Dream-Land" performs these operations in reverse. Here, normatively white readers are transported to the recesses of what will prove to be a swamp, a haven of safety for self-emancipated slaves. The opening lines of "Dream-Land" unfold as a tangle of syntax, meter, rhyme, and narrative content that calls into question even the basic categories of time and space. It would be difficult to overstate the sense of dislocation that characterizes the first octave. All lines but one begin by pairing a preposition with an indefinite article: "By a" "Where an" "On a" "From an" and "From a." Yet this string of locational phrases does little to help orient even the most careful readers, who are inexorably drawn "Out of SPACE—out of TIME."

BY a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule —
From a wild weird clime, that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE—out of TIME.

(1–8)

The indefinite article "an," along with the descriptive adjectives, "ultimate" and "dim," at once grant and deny specificity to "Thule," the mythi-

31. This review appeared in the *Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* (September 1829).

32. Despite its ubiquitous citation and anthologization, I would number "Dream-Land" among those Poe works that Dayan has described as "really bizarre, apparently nonsensical, and most stylistically jarring" (*Fables of Mind*, 8).

cal land at the northernmost ends of the earth.³³ It is clear that the speaker has traveled by a little known, isolated route. Yet we cannot tell whether the ill angels of the second line haunt the route, “these lands,” or dim Thule itself (if these latter two are indeed distinct). Likewise, it is unclear just where it is that the Eidolon reigns.³⁴ And answers to the larger questions of precisely who the speaker is, where he has traveled, or even where he has “newly” arrived become increasingly opaque as the poem proceeds.

In this first stanza, it seems clear that “dim Thule” is an alien place, and “these lands” are home to the speaker as well as his audience. Yet by the third stanza it starts to seem as if “this ultimately dim Thule” may be where the poem’s readers reside; the speaker’s home (“my home”) may in fact be the otherworldly region he has begun to describe. The final couplet of the fourth stanza, “And thus the sad Soul that here passes / Beholds it but through darkened glasses,” further aligns the reader, as opposed to the speaker, with the “traveler, traveling through [Dream-Land].” Bespectacled and perusing a first-hand account of someone who has perhaps inhabited, rather than merely traveled through, “Dream-Land,” the reader is distinguished from the speaker. While this “wild weird clime” is foreign to us, it seems that it may well be familiar to the speaker.

Faced with the poem’s unanswerable questions, one feels almost forced to conclude, as Poe’s “Mr. B.” did of the *Confessions of an Opium Eater* in the satiric “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1845), that what we find here is “glorious imagination— . . . and a good spicing of the decidedly unintelligible.”³⁵ Yet the poem’s onslaught of indecipherable indexicals, along with its seeming separation of the speaker from the reader, do not figure ethereal transcendence, absence, or placelessness. The directional markers that the poem insistently assembles point somewhere. The problem is not a lack of a place; it is rather an excess of location—we get too much direction, not too little—along with the darkness or “dim”-ness that characterizes the place in question. Poe elsewhere identifies such pregnant obscurity as a hallmark of successful poetry, which in his view offers a “suggestive indefinitiveness of meaning, with the view of bringing about a definitiveness of vague and therefore of spiritual effects.”³⁶

33. J. O. Bailey explores this invocation of this northern realm in relation to contemporary polar explorations. See “The Geography of Poe’s ‘Dream-Land’ and ‘Ulalume,’” *Studies in Philology* 45 (1948): 512–23.

34. Poe is mixing romantic and classical imagery here. An eidolon is a ghost, phantom, or image, and in this use of the word Poe is referring to the Greek Theosophical concept of a shadow or astral double of a departed physical being. Ultima Thule refers to a mythical island on the northernmost borders of the world.

35. Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 281.

36. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1331.

Following Poe's logic, I propose that the "vague and therefore spiritual . . . effect" of this poem's "indefinitiveness" is the interweaving of place and person. This interrelation between locality and identity is also in play in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841). In the year following his death, Monos relates, "the consciousness of *being* had grown hourly more indistinct, and that of mere *locality* had, in great measure, usurped its position. The idea of entity was becoming merged in that of *place*. The narrow space immediately surrounding what had been the body, was now growing to be the body itself."³⁷ Here "being" and "locality" merge, as body comes to occupy the space from which it once perceived itself as being distinct. We see this as well in a later tale, "The Domain of Arnheim" (1846), which exemplifies Poe's inclination to elide person and place when the fictional "voyager" of the second half of the tale finds himself, in body and mind, in thrall to the sensuousness of the landscape that surrounds him.³⁸

This breakdown of the distinction between interior and exterior, place and person is quintessentially Poe, and quintessentially gothic.³⁹ Because the gothic was crucial to nineteenth-century Anglo-American literary history, it must be taken into account in any reassessment of the aesthetic in this period.⁴⁰ As Leslie Fiedler famously proclaimed, American literature "is almost essentially a gothic one."⁴¹ Although most critical discussion of the gothic has focused on prose fiction, Poe illustrates the vitality of the gothic in poetry as well, in poems such as "The Raven," "The Conqueror Worm" (1843), "The Haunted Palace" (1839), and, of course, "Dream-

37. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 457.

38. See Dayan, *Fables of Mind*, 93, 104.

39. As Benjamin F. Fisher notes, Poe admirers often wrongly assume that he invented gothic fiction. In point of fact, Poe was rather a latecomer, and some contemporary critics "deplored his wasting talents on what they deemed had become an outmoded type of fiction" ("Poe and the Gothic Tradition," in Hayes, *Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, 72).

40. I disagree with Hutchisson's assertion that Poe scholarship needs to move "beyond gothicism" (*Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, x–xi). Nevertheless, a rethinking of the aesthetic in the nineteenth century may well necessitate a radical reconception of the means and ends of the gothic, such as we find in the recent work of Nancy Armstrong, Leonard Tennenhouse, and Siân Silvyn Roberts. See Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, "The Problem of Population and the Form of the American Novel," *American Literary History* 20 (2008): 667–85; Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Being English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (Princeton University Press, 2007); and Siân Silvyn Roberts, *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

41. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Anchor, 1992), 142. More recently, Tennenhouse (*Importance of Being English*) has demonstrated the centrality of the gothic in the work of creating an English diasporic culture in the Americas that would both reproduce and fundamentally change English culture.

Land,” with its evocation of nightmarish landscapes, ghouls, and a ruler named “NIGHT” seated atop a “black throne.”

Natural and built environments, from the craggy castle to lone wood or the “dead waters” of “Dream-Land,” have long been recognized as a defining element of the gothic. Charles Brockden Brown, one of the earliest American gothic writers and an important influence on Poe, famously strove to rework the gothic as American by igniting “the passions and engag[ing] the sympathy of the reader,” not with “castles and chimeras” but instead with uncanny or sublime landscapes.⁴² Calling into question the importance of locale to the gothic, however, recent critics have argued that attention to setting is ultimately not a meaningful way to distinguish the American gothic from its Old World counterparts. For example, Siân Silvyn Roberts proposes that the American gothic differs significantly from British or continental traditions not in its use of “autochthonous themes, settings, characters or authorial biography” but rather in its production of “a complex and wholly distinct” diasporic political subject. Where the British gothic ultimately underwrites a stable, self-determining individual, the American gothic imagines “a constellation of different narrative personas whose mutability and adaptability make them ideally suited to a fluctuating Atlantic world” or the “gothic subjects” her book’s title announces.⁴³

Roberts is brilliant in her assessment of the gothic as productive of “porous, fluid singularities that circulate through wider networks of information and feeling,” rather than some “originary, ordered, proprietary self.” Yet I maintain that the recognition of entities “that exist only in and through their relation to others rather than as ontologically ordered beings that exist prior to social relations” requires careful attention to particularities in environment as well, that is, to relations among persons and places that are not exclusively social but also material.⁴⁴ As Poe recognized: place matters, especially in relation to personhood.

Brown imagined that the “western wilderness” would become the de facto setting for an American gothic. Yet in “Dream-Land,” with its “Titan woods . . . / [and] Lakes that endlessly outspread,” we begin to see that the American gothic setting par excellence will not primarily be the vast, distant open stretches of “unoccupied” land, which were in actuality largely populated by relocated tribal peoples, indigenous Native Americans and

42. Charles Brockden Brown, “To The Public,” in *Edgar Huntley* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 3.

43. Roberts, *Gothic Subjects*, 6, 7.

44. Ibid., 19. Noting that Poe’s “sense of environment . . . did not necessarily separate interior and exterior, rural and urban,” Hutchisson rightly asserts the need “to think more about Poe’s relationship to the environment.” Yet given the fact that gothic is the genre that most insistently collapses such separations, I disagree that it is limiting “to define ‘environment’” in relation to “Gothic setting” (*Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, xi).

white “frontiersman.” Although the American gothic is sometimes set in the West (to great effect), the South is where it most fully takes root: most notably in and around the cramped, close, and strangling swampland that confounded would-be investors and offered refuge to what Daniel O. Sayers has termed “diasporan exiles” (fig. 1).⁴⁵ These included Native Americans, African American fugitives, and some fugitive European American laborers, including Irish indentured servants; and, at least in legend, song, and poetry, the lonely hearts who sought solace for their losses in its shadows.⁴⁶

II. SWAMP AESTHETICS

The swamp, for Poe, is not simply another, newer gothic setting. Instead the melding of place and person, human and nonhuman, land and water that we find in the swamp is broadly constitutive of Poe’s aesthetic theory and practice across his fiction, poetry, and criticism. Across Poe’s oeuvre, we see his attraction to dark and unbearably close settings, whether the cells of the Inquisition in “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842), the catacombs in “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846), or the tarns and living tombs of “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and “Berenice” (1835). Such locales are perfectly suited to the strain of disidentification that runs throughout Poe’s work and underlies his ubiquitous questioning of the distinctiveness of human and animal, waking and sleeping, even life and death.⁴⁷ As David Miller has argued, the swamp dissolved clear categories for nineteenth-century Americans, who endowed it with “an animism that is both spiritual and material and yet neither.”⁴⁸ Neither land nor water but both, the swamp is a terraqueous “wetland” in which, as Monique Allewaert has emphasized, “land becomes sea” and “the fantasy of the bounded body” dissolves.⁴⁹ The surface terrain of the swamp is viscous, fecund, and ungovernable, and the deeper social history of the swamp is equally generative. Thus it is in the swamp that Poe is able to align the bereaved lover and the marooned slave as two figures for creative genius.

45. Daniel O. Sayers, “Diasporan Exiles in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1630–1860,” *Transforming Anthropology* 14 (2006): 10–20. For a description of how Poe and his contemporaries turned to the swamp for its “dark gothic qualities,” see Rebecca McIntyre, “Promoting the Gothic South,” *Southern Cultures* 11 (2005): 40. See also David Miller, *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

46. See Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York University Press, 2014).

47. Dayan, *Fables of Mind*, 15, 134.

48. Miller, *Dark Eden*, 6.

49. Monique Allewaert, *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 18.



Figure 1. Photograph of Lake Drummond. Courtesy of United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Color version available as an online enhancement.

This wetland geography generates the connections, mediations and repetitions across time and space, “the transported presence of places into other ones” that characterize Poe’s aesthetics.⁵⁰

More powerfully than any other swampland, the Great Dismal Swamp captured the popular imagination in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Long infamous in local tales and legends, the Great Dismal was a “very substantial tract of extremely remote land” stretching across Virginia and North Carolina, with the 3,100 acre Lake Drummond at its center (fig. 2).⁵² During the period in which Poe first wrote,

50. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 194. See Gretchen J. Woertendyke, “Geography, Genre, and Hemispheric Regionalism,” *Atlantic Studies* 10 (2013): 211–27, for a lucid explication of the usefulness of Latour’s redistribution of the local in understanding the relationship between genre and geography in early American literature. Where this essay focuses on the swamp in relation to the gothic, Woertendyke explores the oceanic in relation to the work of romance.

51. As Diouf has remarked, “Such was the reputation for isolation of the Great Dismal Swamp that two years after Emancipation, one could hypothesize that some of them still did not know they were legally free” (*Slavery’s Exiles*, 209). See also Lawrence Buell, “Wetland Aesthetics,” *Environmental History* 10 (2005): 670–71; and William Howarth, “Imagined Territory: The Writing of Wetlands,” *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 509–39.

52. The swamp originally covered more than 1.3 million acres. See Daniel O. Sayers, “Landscapes of Alienation: An Archeological Report of Excursions in the Great Dismal Swamp,” *Transforming Anthropology* 15 (2007): 150.

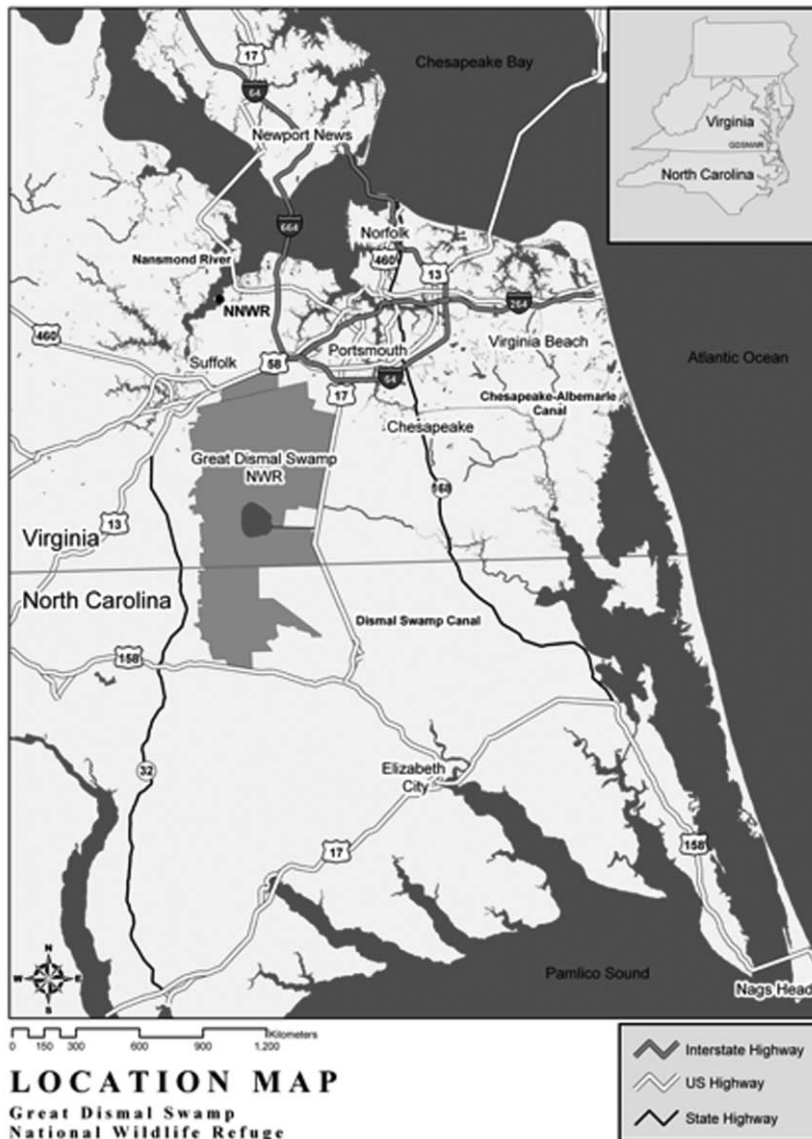


Figure 2. Map of the Great Dismal Swamp Wildlife Refuge. Courtesy of United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Color version available as an online enhancement.

revised, and published “Dream-Land” and related poems, the Great Dismal Swamp came into national prominence in Samuel Warner’s 1831 *Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene, Which Was Witnessed in Southampton County (Virginia) On Monday the 22nd of August Last*, which enjoyed a wide distribution in the wake of Nat Turner’s insurrection. Warner included a lengthy description of the Great Dismal, in which Turner took refuge before his capture. The proximity of the swamp to the site of the revolt, as Daphne Brooks remarks, “canonized antebellum perceptions of the Great Dismal as an environmental obstacle course” and cemented, for a time at least, the “cultural infamy” of swamps in general and Great Dismal in particular as “haunting and treacherous territory.”⁵³ By the time Poe published “Dream-Land,” the Great Dismal Swamp was firmly entrenched in US culture.

Beyond the broad cultural resonance of the Great Dismal Swamp, Poe, who was raised in Virginia, is also known to have visited the Great Dismal and to have been influenced by poets and artists who represented this place.⁵⁴ In his essay on home furnishings, “The Philosophy of Furniture” (1840), Poe lists John Gadsby Chapman’s painting *The Lake of the Dismal Swamp* as a being particularly well suited to the walls of a “well-furnished” room (fig. 3). Poe explicitly connects the Great Dismal with “landscapes of an imaginative cast—such as the fairy grottoes of Stanfield, or the lake of the Dismal Swamp, of Chapman.”⁵⁵ Just as travelers to Great Dismal Swamp encounter Lake Drummond at the center of the swamp, when readers come to the middle of “Dream-Land,” they find lakes that “outspread / Their lone waters, lone and dead.” In one of Poe’s earliest published poems, “The Lake” (1827), the speaker describes a similar “wild lake with black rock bound / And the tall trees that tower’d around.” Commentators have asserted that “The Lake” (which was included, provocatively for our purposes, as one of the “Fugitive Pieces” in *Tamerlane and*

53. Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 104–5.

54. As Miller writes, “that the Dismal Swamp fascinated Poe is little to be doubted” (*Dark Eden*, 41). See also Robert Morrison, “Poe’s ‘The Lake: To—,’” *Explicator* 7 (December 1948): 36–37; and Burton R. Pollin, “Edgar Allan Poe and John G. Chapman: Their Treatment of the Dismal Swamp and the Wissahickon,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1983): 245–74.

55. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 387. Walters has suggested that this painting “was such a popular image that it became a conversational idiom.” As evidence he cites the short story, “A Day in a Railway Car” (*Godley’s* 1842), in which an elderly woman living alone in a boarding house, when questioned about her well-being, replies that although she has little left to live for, she has “not yet got into the Dismal Swamp” (“Poe’s ‘Philosophy of Furniture,’” 7). Pace Walters, I would argue that it was not the painting itself that drove the idiom but rather cultural resonance of the Great Dismal Swamp more broadly.



Figure 3. John Gadsby Chapman, *The Lake of the Dismal Swamp* (ca. 1825). Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Other Poems) was inspired Poe's visits to the Dismal Swamp's Lake Drummond, a "strange body of water . . . believed to be poisonous."⁵⁶

Thomas Moore, an Irish poet Poe admired, also visited the Great Dismal Swamp and penned "A Ballad: The Lake of the Dismal Swamp" (1803). The ballad's foreword indicates Moore's reliance on a local legend of young man searching for his lost love: "They tell of a young man who lost his mind upon the death of a girl he loved, and who, suddenly disappearing from his friends, was never afterwards heard of. As he had frequently said, in his ravings, that the girl was not dead, but gone to the Dismal Swamp, it is supposed he had wandered into that dreary wilderness, and . . . been lost." Moore suggests that this heartbroken lover was a dreamer and melancholic: "when, on earth, he sunk to sleep / If slumber his eyelids knew / He lay where the deadly vine doth weep / Its venomous tear."⁵⁷ In Moore's bereaved lover, able to fall asleep only amid the deadly swamp, we find a clear poetic source for Poe's speaker in "Dream-Land." Poe reanimates this lost young man, familiar both from local leg-

56. Poe, *Complete Poems*, 83, 536.

57. Thomas Moore, "A Ballad: The Lake of the Dismal Swamp," in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore* (Philadelphia, 1849), 105.

ends Poe would have heard in his youth and from the poetry he later admired, as the speaker of “Dream-Land.”

Though the poem is foreboding in much of its imagery, the penultimate stanza proclaims that Dream-Land is a peaceful place for the soul burdened by experience: “for the heart whose woes are legion / ’T is a peaceful, soothing region—” (51–52). The poem reaches an emotional high point when the speaker proclaims, “For the spirit that walks in shadow / ’T is—oh ’tis an Eldorado!” (53–54). The rapture of his tone suggests the speaker’s spiritual affinity with “Dream-Land,” a sense that is solidified in the following line, which sets up a contrast between the speaker and “the traveler, traveling through it” (55). Here in “dim Thule,” we find another evocation of Poe’s early poem “The Lake,” which speaks of “the solitary soul that could make / An Eden of that dim lake.”⁵⁸ The speaker of “Dream-Land” is himself “A spirit who walks in shadow” (53) lost to the world at large but at home in this dusky “Eldorado.” He appears, in other words, like nothing so much as another one of Poe’s bereaved lovers.

By extension, the speaker also represents the poet par excellence. Like the speakers of “The Raven” (1845) and “Annabel Lee” (1849), the pain of lost love has separated him from the world at large: “And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side / Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride, / . . . In her tomb by the sounding sea.” Such a mourner, of course, occupies the most privileged place in Poe’s aesthetics. In “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) Poe famously proclaims that the death “of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world;” therefore it is “beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover.” To retain the height of poetic power, one must surrender to the “*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” that Poe in that essay suggests the Raven ultimately emblemizes: “And my soul *from out that shadow* that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted—nevermore.”⁵⁹ Unable to make his psyche whole in the face of deep loss, the melancholic poet in Poe’s aesthetics is a figure of broken personhood positioned “Out of SPACE—out of TIME.” In Freudian terms, he is not a mourner who visits “Dream-Land” in order to return to everyday life; he is the melancholic who fully inhabits his loss.⁶⁰

58. Both “Dream-Land” and “The Lake” take inspiration from Moore’s “I Wish I Was by That Dim Lake,” a poem Poe praised as “more profoundly—more wierdly [*sic*] *imaginative*, in the best sense” than any other in the English language (*Essays and Reviews*, 85).

59. Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 19, 25. For a provocative reading of “The Raven” that connects Poe’s aesthetics to race, see Betsy Erkkilä’s work on the raven as an African American voice in “The Poetics of Whiteness: Poe and the Racial Imaginary,” in Kennedy and Weissberg, *Romancing the Shadow*, 41–74.

60. For an exploration of how literary representations of grief challenge normative temporal and historical frameworks, see Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York University Press, 2008).

But Poe and his contemporaries well knew that bereaved lovers were not the only spirits casting shadows “Out of SPACE—out of TIME.” The Great Dismal Swamp was best known as the home of escaped slaves and their descendants: it contained “the largest population of maroons in North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with thousands of individuals taking part over that span.”⁶¹ The print record tells a similar story: “From the last quarter of the eighteenth century, discussions of maroons in the Dismal Swamp appeared regularly in various types of documents, including newspapers” (fig. 4).⁶² Two years before “Dream-Land,” Longfellow published a vastly different, idyllic representation of “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” (1842). Poe condemned the poem as “a shameless medley of the grossest misrepresentation.”⁶³ In Longfellow’s depiction, the swamp is a welcoming place “bright and fair.”

All things were glad and free;
Blithe squirrels darted here and there
And wild birds filled the echoing air
With songs of Liberty!

(21–25)

Longfellow writes in support of the abolitionist movement, to excoriate and correct the problem of slavery. Yet in his representation of the Great Dismal Swamp, the only thing troubling in the landscape is the “hunted” long-suffering slave, “infirm and lame.”⁶⁴ By contrast, “Dream-Land,” dwells with the disaggregation of self that the swamp brings into view.

In the popular imagination, the swamp and its terrors were in fact much more often associated with the strength than the weakness of African Americans. Some of the more famous examples of Great Dismal Swamp maroons included Nat Turner’s father, who was rumored in print and oral accounts to be a resident of the Great Dismal. Drawing on the many associations between Turner and the swamp, Harriet Beecher Stowe later answered those who criticized the passivity of Uncle Tom with *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856). Dred was a Great Dismal Swamp maroon

61. Daniel O. Sayers, P. Brendan Burke, and Aaron M. Henry, “The Political Economy of Exile in the Great Dismal Swamp,” *International Journal of Historical Archeology* 11 (2007): 72. Herbert Aptheker (“Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States,” reprinted in *Maroon Societies, Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 152) notes that maroons “carried on a regular, if illegal, trade with white people living on the borders of the swamp,” which suggests that those familiar with the area, like Poe in his boyhood, would have been well aware of their presence.

62. Sayers et al., “Political Economy of Exile,” 72.

63. Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 763.

64. Here I am indebted to Dayan’s excellent discussion of Poe in relation to Longfellow (“Amorous Bondage,” 194).



Figure 4. "Now I had long nurtured a wish to see one of those sable outlaws who dwell in the fastness of the swamp." Porte Crayon, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1856. Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society. Color version available as an online enhancement.

who prophesied a violent end to enslavers and fostered a welcoming community for those who had escaped slavery in the nethermost reaches of the swamp. Harriet Jacobs's birthplace was just south of the Great Dismal, surrounded by smaller swamps and maroon communities. These swamps appear at key moments in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), including Jacob's own harrowing account of her *petit marronage*, or temporary escape, to the snaky swamp.

Although the Great Dismal sheltered any number of runaways in the short term, its unique geography sustained *grand marronage*, or the establishment of permanent maroon communities.⁶⁵ According to abolitionist James Redpath's transcription of the account of a former Dismal Swamp maroon who later settled in Canada: "Dar is families growed up in dat dar Dismal Swamp dat never seed a white man, an' would be skeered most to def to see one. Some runaways went dere wid dar wives, an' dar childers ar raised dar."⁶⁶ Currently, historical archeologists led by Sayers are engaged in the first ever exploration of the communities that existed in the Great Dismal Swamp from 1607 through the Civil War. Though the material evidence is still being compiled, it corroborates the documentary record: "inhabitation of the swamp by maroons . . . continued until at least the end of the Civil War."⁶⁷

In "Dream-Land," maroons first appear as ghouls, in a line that is visually and metrically offset from the rest of the poem:

By the dismal tarns and pools
Where dwell the Ghouls,—
(35–36)

Along with "Out of SPACE—out of TIME" this is the only line indented to the right and the only line that presents a sharp break with the metrical pattern. "Out of SPACE—out of TIME" has grabbed all the attention. But without a doubt "Where dwell the Ghouls" is—visually, metrically, and in relation to signification—the most important line in the poem. "Where dwell the Ghouls" is hidden in plain sight nearly in the dead center of the poem, just after the description of the lake that recalls Lake Drum-

65. Aptheker ("Maroons within the Present Limits") has posited that up to fifty maroon communities existed across the slaveholding states; nevertheless, Tommy Lee Bogger points to the Great Dismal as "one of the few places in the United States where geographic conditions made it possible for a large colony of runaways to establish a permanent refuge" ("Maroons and Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp," in *Readings in Black and White: Lower Tidewater Virginia*, ed. Jane H. Kobelski [Portsmouth, VA: Portsmouth Public Library, 1982], 2).

66. Quoted in Sayers et al., "Political Economy of Exile," 74.

67. *Ibid.*, 73.

mond. The stanza begins by echoing the image of dead white purity in “the snows of the lolling lily.” With the phrase “murmuring lowly, murmuring ever,” this stanza gently reincorporates the movement from the beginning of the previous stanza. Space and time are doubled here, as this reincorporation gives the whole not only an echoing effect of sound carried across time but also a mirroring effect of place replicated elsewhere, much like the reflective surface of those lone and dead waters.

As we approach these Ghouls, the description of the place—though still haunting and “indefinitive,” gains a measure of palpability:

By the grey woods,—by the swamp
Where the toad and the newt encamp,—
By the dismal tarns and pools
Where dwell the Ghouls,—

(33–36)

Here we have not clear, sparkling surface, but “grey,” “dismal,” “swamp.” Warner writes: “It is within the deep recesses of this gloomy Swamp, ‘dismal’ indeed, beyond the power of human conception, that the runaway Slaves of the South have been known to secret themselves for weeks, months and years, subsisting on frogs, tarripins, and even snakes! And when these have failed them, would prefer becoming the victims of starvation to returning again to bondage!”⁶⁸ Poe’s “dismal tarns and pools,” like Warner’s swamp, “‘dismal indeed,’” stand as home to reptiles and refugees alike, “ghouls” who have traded the living death of slavery for a home in the swamp, “beyond the powers of human conception.”

III. FUGITIVE GENIUS

Frogs, fugitives, and poets are not opposed in Poe’s poetics: they are, rather, apposed. But genius/slave and aesthetic/swamp are not stand-ins or allegories for one other; instead the poem reconfigures what art means by aligning its imaginative escape with the flight of the fugitive slave into the swamp. Maroons find freedom in the swamp even as they remain enmeshed with that environment and fugitives from the law of the state. Their freedom is the “fugitive liberty” that Barnor Hesse has located within the black radical tradition. Not wholly bound by either the metaphors or the materiality of slavery, this liberty is enmeshed with the “colonial aporias, liberal antinomies and racial atrocities in the formative constitutions of Western polities and concepts of liberty,” even

68. Samuel Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene, Which Was Witnessed in Southampton County (Virginia) On Monday the 22nd of August Last* (New York, 1831), 34.

as it seeks to escape from them.⁶⁹ By apposing poet and maroon, “Dream-Land” invites consideration of how the genius might also find freedom in constraint, of how his most enduring legacy might be that of the “escapologist,” committed to “eluding, revealing and interrogating the liberal-colonial suturing of Western liberty as whiteness.”⁷⁰

This notion of the genius as an enmeshed escapologist rather than a liberated subject turns out to be surprisingly ubiquitous in the romantic era. Immanuel Kant’s formulation of genius is often cited as the source the consummate, self-determined individual that ideological critiques of the aesthetic impugn. Yet even in *Critique of Judgment*, the figure of the genius emerges as the producer of aesthetic objects, governed by nature, and characterized not by independence but by entanglement: “[Genius] cannot itself describe or indicate scientifically how it brings its product into being, but rather . . . gives the rule as nature, and hence the author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan, and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products.”⁷¹ Kant’s genius is subject to the natural world, does not know the source of that which he produces, and does not control it. Likewise for Poe, the impetus for aesthetic creation comes not from the ultimate sovereignty of the individual genius but from the involvement of genius with a larger environment.⁷²

Although Poe has long stood as a model of troubled, romantic Genius, when we look at places in Poe’s writing where he discusses genius directly, we can see more clearly the multiple ways the category of genius operated in Poe’s lifetime. Geoffrey Hartman has described a tension in romantic poetics between the capital-G Genius and the genius loci: “The artist’s struggle with his vocation—with past masters and the ‘pastness’ of art in modern society” evokes a larger struggle “of genius with Genius, and

69. Barnor Hesse, “Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity,” *Political Theory* 42 (2014): 289. For a related discussion of the inherently “fugitive” nature of justice in relation to the reparations debate, see Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best, “Fugitive Justice,” *Reparations* 92 (2005): 1–15.

70. Hesse, “Escaping Liberty,” 37.

71. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer and trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 186–87.

72. This is not to suggest that Poe’s conception of genius and the aesthetic is identical to Kant’s. *Critique of Judgment* was not translated in its entirety into English until 1892, and the question of Kant’s influence on Poe has been much debated. While many assert that Kant reached Poe solely via Coleridge, Glen A. Omans has argued that Poe read German well enough to have read Kant in the original; see “‘Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense’: Poe’s Debt to Immanuel Kant,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1980): 123–67.

of genius with the genius loci (spirit of a place).⁷³ The ghouls of Poe's poem stand in contrast to the Genius or transcendent spirit of romantic poetics. Unlike ghosts or spirits—supernatural creatures that travel with ease through time and space—ghouls are tied to a specific locality. Where the Genius represents a spirit that is deep, profound, unbound, and expansive, the genius loci is a ghoulishly tied to local environment. Occasionally, we do find Poe making romantic statements about genius such as "The higher genius is a rare gift and divine." Moreover Poe, prone to fictionalizing his own life story, often represented himself as precisely this kind of exceptional genius.⁷⁴ But despite the fact that he sought to increase his social standing by romanticizing his past and exaggerating his abilities, Poe neither articulated nor espoused a systematic formulation of the artist as an exceptional individual who boldly asserted a singular path to liberation, entirely heedless of social consequences or moral considerations. Poe's aesthetic theory and practice remains fundamentally incoherent; as often as Poe was seemingly guided by romantic ideals of consummate artistry, he was equally invested in the mechanical aspects of literary production.⁷⁵

Although the conception of the alienated artist-genius, the *poète maudit* has largely predominated in Poe's subsequent cultural canonization, it was only just beginning to take vague form during his lifetime. In fact, Poe did not emphasize freedom, as a reading of Poe as a romantic or as an early proponent of "l'art pour l'art" might anticipate, as a necessary condition for creation. Instead he valued constraint. Poe argued that a writer must keep his aim of originality "always in view," but not out of a desire for transcendence. The reason is entirely mundane: "he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest."⁷⁶ Poe highlights the necessity of material external to the genius himself in the process of creation: "So long as the universe of thought shall furnish matter for novel combinations, so long will the spirit of genius be

73. Geoffrey Hartman, "Toward Literary History" *Daedalus* 99 (1970): 365.

74. Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 314. In the words of biographer Kenneth Silverman, by late adolescence Poe "had cultivated an image of himself as a precocious genius, cursed from birth and recklessly adventurous" (*Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* [New York: Harper Collins, 1992], 61–62).

75. As Polonsky argues, Poe's "works of taste and criticism," form the "coordinates of a fundamentally uncoordinated body of aesthetic theory which ultimately turns away from the possibility of theorizing about art" ("Poe's Aesthetic Theory," 44). It is important to remember that Poe's relation to romanticism predates that of the Transcendentalists, whom Poe harshly critiqued; see Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy and Literature*, 49.

76. Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 13. Originality for Poe, as Jonathan Elmer notes, "is not, as it were, a simple given but is rather purely relational, the mark of difference" (*Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture and Edgar Allan Poe* [Stanford University Press, 1995], 34).

original, be exhaustless—be itself.” For genius to be “original,” then, it must remain interwoven with a material environment.⁷⁷ The “universe of thought” is not pure ideality; rather it “furnishes matter” for the poet; in “Dream-Land” that matter is the Great Dismal Swamp. However unlikely, the maroon thus emerges as a type of genius, a type that Poe resisted and yet was drawn toward in his ongoing critique of Enlightenment humanism.

Though bound up with environment and place, Poe’s genius is definitively “out of” those conceptions of space and time that, as Johannes Fabian has argued, are needed for Western cultural and political imperialism “to accommodate the schemes of a one-way historical progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition).”⁷⁸ For enslaved peoples, development and modernity often meant sale away from friends and loved ones. Finding stability and a longed-for stasis on the mucky surfaces of the swamp rather than smoothly navigating the open expanses of the western frontier, the maroon/ghoul emerges as the genius loci of Poe’s poem. As Daylanne K. English demonstrates, “differential temporalities and differential justices in the United States” characterize African American experience and culture: “time and justice are not established realities” but are “actually contingent and unevenly available . . . political fictions.”⁷⁹ Evoking widely held beliefs (including Poe’s own) that apocalyptic racial violence was imminent, Poe further figures the place and (non)persons of “Dream-Land” outside regnant conceptions of time and space by reference to the apocalyptic Book of Revelation.⁸⁰ Like martyrs awaiting final

77. Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 319. For a discussion of Poe’s attitude toward originality in relation to the widespread culture of reprinting in his era, see Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

78. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 144. For a discussion of the “often ignored disaggregating potential of this period’s literature and its peculiar account of time,” see Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 2–3. For a related discussion of the historical potential of nonnormative modes of inhabiting time, see Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

79. Daylanne K. English, *Each Hour Redeem: Time and Justice in African American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 24. For a discussion of the distributed agencies that contributed to the eventual, nonsynchronous emancipation of enslaved Americans beyond “a dramatic moment of jubilee,” see Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 24.

80. John Ernest usefully maps the nonchronological coordinates of African American literary history in “Choreographing Chaos: African American Literature in Time and Space,” in *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 147–92.

judgment, in “Dream-Land” one finds “white robed forms of friends long given, / In agony, to the worms, and Heaven.”⁸¹

If the description “Out of SPACE—out of TIME” in Poe’s most aestheticized poem refers to a differential temporality and spatiality, rather than the transcendence of time and space, then the essentially allegorical approach that often guides historicist readings falls far short of its mark.⁸² To understand the workings of genius in the nineteenth-century United States, we do not need to unveil the ground beneath the figure via the depth hermeneutic that undergirds historicist criticism. Instead we need to understand artistic practice as mediation and limitation, even theft: a fugitive genius. The swamp of “Dream-Land” suggests that the contours of aesthetic philosophy and concepts of genius were shaped not only by those at the center of Anglo-European culture who authored key works on these subjects, white Anglo-European philosophers and poets such as Kant and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but also by those at the periphery: slaves and criminals, and especially the fugitive slave or maroon, who was at once (former) slave and criminal.⁸³

All of these figures come together in the specter of the “Eidolon, named NIGHT” who reigns in “Dream-Land,” seated atop a “black throne.” This black king is invoked in each of the four repetitions of the refrain. In the penultimate stanza, the reader learns that he has forbidden clear sight in this aesthetic space:

Never its mysteries are exposed
To the weak human eye unclosed;
So wills the king, who hath forbid
The uplifting of the fringed lid.
(57–60)

When in the surround of “Dream-Land,” the abstract and abstracting eye/I of the Enlightenment subject must be closed: its regnant modes of being are not primarily visual and rational. The “unclosed” eye, when associated with an idea of mind separated from the body, cannot see any-

81. The NRSV translates the relevant lines from Rev. 6:9–11 as follows: “I saw . . . those who had been slain because of the word of God . . . given a white robe, and . . . told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.”

82. Poe himself was famously hostile to allegory, as we see in his late review of Hawthorne: “In defence of allegory, (however, or for whatever object, employed,) there is scarcely one respectable word to be said” (*Essays and Reviews*, 582).

83. See esp. Susan Buck-Morss, *Haiti, Hegel, and Universal History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton University Press, 2011); and Jennifer Greeson, “The Prehistory of Possessive Individualism,” *PMLA* 127 (2012): 918–24.

thing at all. Yet for Poe as for Latour, to have a body “is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated,’ moved, put into motion by other entities. If you are not engaged in this learning you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead.”⁸⁴ Dream-Land is not the sanitized, incorporeal plane of existence reached only by the sleeping or the dead. Instead, it is a space of embodiment and embeddedness in a material environment. Poe’s genius, more genius loci than Genius, engages an aesthetic that is not pure, isolated, hard surface but instead murky, connected, soft: the vibrant, material ecology of a swamp.

IV. ECOLOGICAL ACCOUNTING

In my reading of “Dream-Land,” Poe’s experiments with form, relation to poetic antecedents, processes of revision, and his own writings on poetics join with his knowledge of local legends, economic motivations, and intimacy with the Virginia landscape to keep both the historical and the formal aspects of his aesthetic in play, without making any one of them “the context ‘in which’ everything is framed.”⁸⁵ Rather these are several of the “many connecting elements” that come together in a swamp aesthetic that engulfs the distinction between the literal and the figurative, text and context. “Dream-Land” thus emerges as one of the “ecological accounts” that Allewaert has identified across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such accounts, inspired by the swamp, represent human and nonhuman forces working together to undermine “the fantasy that subjects remained distinct from an object world that was simply acted on.”⁸⁶

In its exploration of conditions of existence that are simultaneously within, alongside and outside the material and temporal, the ecological account “Dream-Land” generates points to a way past some limitations in historicist approaches to the subject of race in Americanist scholarship, which have often obscured the entanglements of the aesthetic by asserting the dominion of historical context over the work of art. Such studies take race and slavery as the unconscious yet literal ground from which Poe’s figurative language springs: the cause is race or slavery, and the effect is Poe’s gothic macabre horrors, as well as his pure, otherworldly realms. As we see in volumes such as J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg’s *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, many important readings of Poe have operated on this suggestion that a disavowed historical “reality” is buried

84. Bruno Latour, “How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies,” *Body and Society* 10 (2004): 207.

85. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 4.

86. Monique Allewaert, “Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the Plantation Zone,” *PMLA* 123 (2008): 354.

beneath the “aesthetic” surface of Poe’s tales and poems.⁸⁷ By contrast, Maurice Lee holds Poe staunchly to account for his “absolute” and entirely conscious racism.⁸⁸ But the cause-and-effect logic evident on both sides of this debate reinforces the idea that art and politics inhabit separate spheres.

Against such logic, “Dream-Land” confounds the operative distinction between the literal and the figurative, the “real world” and an “aesthetic realm.”⁸⁹ Angus Fletcher’s identification of “environment-poems” as those poems that “surround us in exactly the way an actual environment surrounds us” is helpful in conceptualizing this interweaving of history and aesthetics in “Dream-Land” and in Poe’s work more broadly.⁹⁰ The environment that “Dream-Land” enacts swallows up “the old distinction between the world within the poem and the world ‘out there’ outside the poem.”⁹¹ The world “within” the poem is not a place of refuge to be read solely on its own terms; neither is the “outside” of the poem a place of pure historical fact untouched by the world of imagination and fantasy.

While I have been emphasizing the geography of the swamp in the poem, we can also see Poe’s integration of discrete locales in the poem’s simultaneous invocation of geographies that are polar (“ultimate dim Thule”) as well as tropical. Read in relation to Poe’s oeuvre, this enmeshment of polar and tropical geographies helps solidify the fugitive presence of raced embodiment in “Dream-Land,” since this pairing also appears in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). The suggestive figuration of raced embodiment in the ghouls as well as the black-throned king of “Dream-Land” resonate with Poe’s more literal treatment of race on

87. For an expansive and lucid account of the limitations and possibilities of new historicism, see Alan Liu, *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

88. As Lee brilliantly demonstrates, “unconscious production is a consciously theorized aspect of Poe’s thought—both in his metaphysics of race and in his thinking on art” (*Slavery, Philosophy and Literature*, 45). While I am persuaded that Poe’s racism was likely conscious, I maintain that his aesthetics exceeds this context. For an analysis of how Poe’s critique of Enlightenment tenets overwhelms his proslavery position, see Betsy Erkkilä, “Perverting the American Renaissance: Poe, Democracy, Critical Theory,” in *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Jerome McGann (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 65–100; and Erin E. Forbes, “From Prison Cell to Slave Ship: Social Death in ‘The Premature Burial,’” *Poe Studies* 46 (2013): 46–47.

89. Wilson has made a similar argument about the need to return the aesthetic to its political and historical foundations, in order to “offer a reading of a subversive black aesthetic” concerned with “the affective possibilities of aesthetics as a model and a means through which collectivities can fulfill the unfinished work of democracy” (*Specters of Democracy*, 8).

90. Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory For American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 227.

91. *Ibid.*, 227.

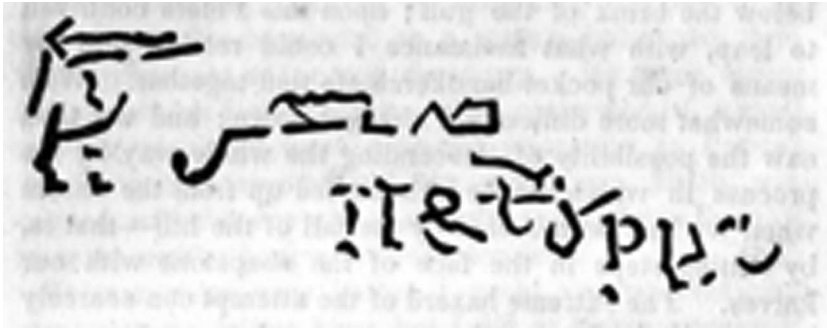


Figure 5. Illustration of hieroglyphic formation of chasms in Edgar Allan Poe, *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society. Color version available as an online enhancement.

the fictional Antarctic island of Tsalal, with its indigenous black inhabitants and their deathly fear of whiteness. Tsalal is an “island of chasms,” and just as the “chasms and caves” of “Dream-Land” tantalize with “forms that no man can discover,” the mysterious hieroglyphic chasms of Tsalal form what appear to be hieroglyphs or alphabetic configurations, which Poe’s fictional editor reads as racially inflected messages from the land itself: “to be shady” and “to be white” (fig. 5).⁹² Literally and figuratively, race is inscribed in both environments.

By tracing multiple lines of connection from a poem whose significance has seemed obvious even to readers inclined to disagree about everything else, we open a window onto a much more expansive view of nineteenth-century conceptions of the aesthetic. “Dream-Land” is not an ahistorical allegory of the aesthetic: neither the maroon nor the swamp function as the original social reality behind the poem’s aestheticized surface. Rather the poem moves readers from two planes, understood variously as depth and surface, context and text, literal and figurative, to one flattened plane of analysis.⁹³ The powerful insight that attention to this short poem offers, then, is that history is not the bedrock that grounds aesthetic effects. Instead, maroons and artists alike are not wholly circumscribed by the history of slavery. Especially where a construct as fundamentally troubled as race is involved, history is not ontologically secure but rather the product of common efforts, including the practice of the aesthetic. Poe’s “Dream-Land” demonstrates the necessity of shifting our crit-

92. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, ed. Richard Kopley (New York: Penguin, 1999), 220.

93. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 205.

ical gaze from “context” or ideology toward something more akin to ecology, where history and the material world come together as part (but not the whole) of the stories we tell about those living beyond regnant modalities for reckoning space and time.

Rather than standing in for one another, genius/slave and aesthetic/swamp cohabit in “Dream-Land.” This happens not on the hard surface of the poem, but in the soft quagmire of the swamp that gives it form and the “indefinitiveness” that generates a multiplicity of connections. As in “The Purloined Letter,” published the same year as “Dream-Land,” that which we seek is directly in our line of sight. Best and Marcus find in this tale a potential precedent for surface reading: “‘The Purloined Letter’ continues to teach us [that] what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it.”⁹⁴ While it is true that much can be missed by an inquiry motivated by suspicion, it is problematic simply to erase Dupin from the story. The prototype of all future detectives, it is Dupin who identifies the significance of “what lies in plain sight.” The genius of Poe’s poem, more ghoul than ghost, pursues an aesthetic that is not hard, isolated, and pure surface—but instead vibrant, connected, and dynamic. Poe creates a living, chaotic environment in which genius, maroon, reader, and critic all must struggle for footing. In so doing, he practices a swamp aesthetic that is variegated, labile, and material—like the damp, dark, and fertile ecology of the swamplands that still comprised much of the southern United States in his day.

94. Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 18.